

# The Dwarfing of Europe?

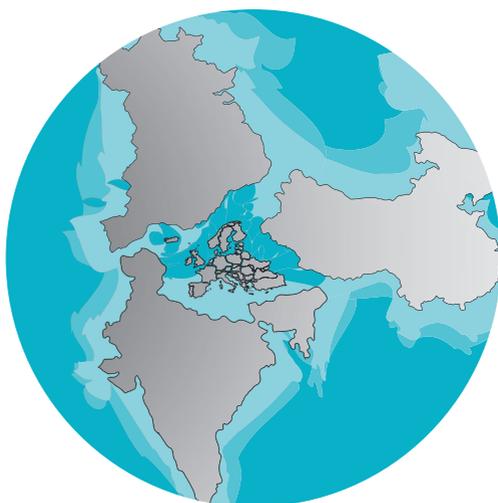
Perspectives from the Balkans, Belarus,  
the Middle East and Asia



Volume 1

# The Dwarfing of Europe?

Perspectives from the Balkans, Belarus,  
the Middle East and Asia



European Cultural Foundation

*Dedicated to Odile Chenal, with gratitude for her unwavering commitment to Europe and to culture, and in recognition of more than 23 years of loyal and devoted service to the European Cultural Foundation*

# The Dwarfing of Europe?

Perspectives from the Balkans, Belarus,  
the Middle East and Asia

Volume 1



**debalie**  
debalie.nl



*Contributors*

Shreela Ghosh, Basma el Husseiny, Peter Vermeersch, Iryna Vidanova

*Editing*

Andrew May

*Proofreading*

Karen Jochems

*Design and layout*

Martin Takken and Tom Zandwijken

*Production*

Susanne Mors

Published by ECF, Amsterdam 2013

First edition

© European Cultural Foundation 2013

ISBN 978-90-6282-060-3

# Contents

- 7 **Europe in the Mirrors of the World**  
*Foreword by Wolfgang Petritsch and Katherine Watson*
- 11 **Europe – a State of Mind**  
*Shreela Ghosh*
- 19 **Out of Context**  
*Basma el Husseiny*
- 29 **Between Pessimism and Hope**  
*Peter Vermeersch*
- 39 **On the Edge of Europe**  
*Iryna Vidanova*



# Europe in the Mirrors of the World

For centuries Europe considered itself to be the centre of the world. It was the Old Continent from which new worlds were discovered and colonised. The massive economic exploits and human rights abuses were scantily veiled with a dubious *mission civilisatrice*. Many of the concepts and institutions that have shaped the Western world – in politics and economics, in philosophy, the arts and literature – have a strong European imprint. These ideas, whose origins transcend the continent, subsequently contributed to the globalisation of the world we know today. Over the course of the bellicose 20th century, Europe lost its predominance for ever.

Former colonies, having regained their independence, confidently entered the global arena. Brazil and some of its neighbours, even troubled Africa, and above all once faraway empires such as China and the other Asian Tigers – they all have caught up over recent decades and continue to grow at a staggering pace. Ever cheaper travel and new means of communication – the Digital Revolution – have hastened globalisation and brought communities that seemed far apart not so long ago ever closer together. ‘Emerging economies’ were soon challenging those that were considered ‘mature’: the centre of the world was shifting from the Global West to East and South. The financial crisis, which quickly morphed into economic stagnation, even recession, has certainly accelerated these seismic shifts.

Europe is struggling to come to terms with these changes of epic proportions. Crisis management has rightly focused on tangible aspects such as mounting deficits and falling competitiveness, on

fiscal austerity versus socio-economic equilibrium, but the fundamental challenge is this: How will these tumultuous changes affect human values or, more precisely, cultural identities? What is Europe's new role in this multi-polar world of the 21st century? How will we manage our relationship with these emerging partners? Does a 'European mirror' offer the same images as a Brazilian or Indian mirror and how does this affect Europe's self-image? In short, what role and relevance is there for Europe in a globalised world – politically, economically and above all culturally?

It is high time to broaden the debate on Europe and at the same time focus on culture. Where better to look for an objective view of Europe than to our neighbours? In this first volume of *The Dwarfing of Europe?* series, thinkers reflect on the Old Continent's status and identity, as well as its triumphs and foibles, from the perspective of the Balkans, Belarus, the Middle East and Asia. In Volume 2, due to be published in early 2014, the field of view is broadened to include the opinions of some of the finest minds from Brazil, China, and India, concentrating on Europe and its role on the new global stage. The publications draw on a series of debates, seminars and essays organised by the European Cultural Foundation, Tilburg University and the Amsterdam debating centre De Balie in partnership with the Fritt Ord Foundation of Norway. The series as a whole is revisiting Arthur Toynbee's statement from 1948:

*The paradox of our generation is that all the world has now profited by an education which the West has provided, except the West herself. The West today is still looking at history from the old parochial self-centred standpoint which the other living societies have by now been compelled to transcend. Yet, sooner or later, the West, in her turn, is bound to receive the re-education which the other civilizations have obtained already from the unification of the world by Western action.*

We are confident that you – the engaged readers – will come to the conclusion that without the insights of our neighbours we cannot even start to craft new narratives for Europe, never mind cultural narratives that ought to encompass those new global paradigms. It will be these social, economic and mental shifts that will ultimately shape our common future.

Welcome to this new world.

**Wolfgang Petritsch**

Chair of the Board of the European Cultural Foundation

**Katherine Watson**

Director of the European Cultural Foundation



# Europe – a State of Mind

**Shreela Ghosh**

All places are imaginary places. A state of mind, if you catch my drift. The earth looks the same, more or less, across all the continents. At times the soil is so red it seems to glow and I shield my eyes from the mirage shimmering on the horizon; sometimes the grass really is greener in the valley of my dreams; and the ground beneath my feet is always wet whether I'm in Wicklow or Wales. Fortunately, the planet keeps on spinning regardless of you, or me, or where we are.

My imaginary Europe is filled with music, with wondrous sights (nature) and marvellous museums (culture). I come to Europe so I can feast my eyes on the mossy green and hazy purples of the distant hills. I can daydream, looking out at the glens, lakes, forests and the heather on the moors as the train glides oh-so-smoothly across the landscape. I am looking forward to the drive to Mallaig. Of all the long and winding roads in the world this is my favourite. The ferry prepares to sail across the choppy seas taking me to the Outer Hebrides and beyond, if my heart desires. I warm my hands by the fire and sip a single malt with care – every drop of this liquid gold is powerful. Listening to sea shanties is fun in any language and sometimes fiddlers from Finland can be found at the St Magnus Festival on Orkney. Sibelius is soothing and I listen to anything by Jan Garbarek at any hour of the night on my iPod in Delhi; drifting into sleep I dream of my Europe. From a distance of several thousand miles I romanticise Europe, I exoticise Europe. In other words, I am doing exactly what Europeans do when they think of Asia.

Culture provides an excellent way to bridge the gap and create a better understanding of each other between the peoples of the world. The literary magazine *Granta* – one of the most influential publications in the world – has just released the fourth volume of its *Best of Young British Novelists* series. Published every 10 years, this special issue is a reliable indicator of trends in contemporary culture, so as a ‘new European’ I am celebrating the fact that at least 50 percent of the list of 20 authors we should be following are British but have ‘hybrid’ identities, to borrow a term from the eminent academic and cultural theorist Homi Bhaba. In 1983 Salman Rushdie was included in the first volume of this *Granta* series, which has evolved into a literary landmark; in the latest volume Kamila Shamsie (Pakistan) and Tahmima Anam (Bangladesh) are featured alongside a host of other talented writers.

Naturally, I am cheered by the fact that South Asian writers have broken through the barrier and arguably represent the ‘new canon’ of contemporary literature in the English language. Alongside those I have already mentioned such as Rushdie, the other hallowed authors include Vikram Seth, Arundhati Roy, Aravind Adiga, Amitav Ghosh, Mohsin Hamid and Nadeem Aslam. Translated into many languages, all of these authors are celebrated across Europe. At a recent literary gathering in Delhi, when I asked Asian writers for their take on Europe I did not know what to expect. Although these views are not shared by all those who were present, the strength of feeling was palpable: Europe is still regarded as a place where the genocidal impulse is ever-present and the xenophobic tendency is lurking just below the surface. The politesse in Europe is only skin-deep, they said, just look at the record. Where were the worst wars in the history of mankind fought? Which continent colonised the majority of the world attempting to keep most of humanity in darkness whilst talking up enlightenment values? Then they ask why the coalition forces are in Afghanistan today and why the British troops were sent to Iraq. Clutching at straws, I offer a feeble response: Not In My Name. These wars were fought

without my consent – I have demonstrated in the streets of London and registered my protest through the ballot box. What else can I do? Trying to find common ground, I bring the conversation back to culture reminding my new friends about Europe’s contribution. The greats include Shakespeare and Schiller, Bach and Brecht, Michelangelo and Matisse, Picasso and Proust. The list is long. They nod in agreement and smile at me, but there is no escaping the fact that the current conflicts around the globe can all be traced back to Europe’s imperialist adventures. Over 500 years ago the British, the Dutch and the Portuguese sailed off in search of silk and spices and brought home untold riches. Similarly, today’s wars (real and proxy) are being fought over the black gold: oil. This is the commodity to die for. Despite the Green Movement in Europe, oil will still be needed to keep the engines of the economy running until there is a paradigm shift.

Over the past four decades I have travelled extensively in the UK and seen the positive cultural shifts that have shaped modern Britain. There is one question that I cannot seem to dodge – why do people seek me out only to tell me that there is no more room here for ‘us’? By ‘us’ I mean people who ‘look different’, people with different tastes in food or music. And let’s be completely clear, those with beards who worship a different god and pray five times a day are most definitely not welcome here. “It’s nothing personal. You’re OK. You are one of us, but it’s the ‘others’, you see.” The explanation usually goes something like this. Great Britain is a small country, it’s the size of a pocket handkerchief, and the island is sinking under the weight of people from the Global South. Refugees and economic migrants? “Spongers!” scream the tabloid headlines in the kiosks outside the metro stations. In the pull-me-push-you game of geopolitics, these people are allegedly attracted like bees to the European honeypot. They say that the generous social welfare systems (free housing, unemployment benefits, etc.) across Europe act like a magnet to the zillions of Africans who are walking across the stony desert to come and destroy ‘our way of life’. The UK’s National Health Service, created by a socialist

government in the late 1940s as part of the country's post-war reconstruction, apparently beckons to people who have nothing to lose and will, if necessary, swim across the English Channel to get here.

Deeply scarred by the two World Wars of the 20th century, Europeans should know a thing or two about displacement and death. So why the collective amnesia? Enduring horrific journeys in airless containers, the 'wretched of the earth', to borrow Fanon's famous phrase, are driven by hope and courage, not greed. Risking their lives they have come in search of a better future. Many of them are qualified professionals – did they expect to be cleaning our hospitals and washing the dishes in our luxury hotels? And these people are the lucky ones, they are the survivors: Somalis and Ethiopians who have left the fragile states; Tamils who fled the civil war in Sri Lanka; displaced Afghans, desperate Syrians and Iraqis who are forced to seek asylum by circumstances beyond their control. No matter how they arrived on these shores, with their distinct histories and distinctive cultural traditions most of these people will probably face the same fate: they will be stripped of their dignity and identity by Europe. Denied entry at the ports, they will be 'held' in detention centres like Harmondsworth near London or left to fester in temporary camps like Sangatte in France. Whatever happened to European values? Where is the tolerance and compassion that Europe has shown to millions of refugees and asylum-seekers in the past? When will we learn that the world is more interconnected now than ever before?

Migration is not an abstract concept for me. It is a fact (lived experience). Not surprisingly, as a new European I refuse to be a bystander; I will not swallow the statistics showing the increase in racial tension and violence across the European continent. Almost 50 years ago my family migrated to Europe seeking a better life, but this particular story of rupture/displacement goes much further back. Due to the tectonic shifts created by the convulsions of colonialism (a European phenomenon), which led to the partitioning of the Indian

subcontinent, my brave grandmother took her sons by the hand and walked for two days to get to a refugee camp, seeking sanctuary. We have rebuilt our lives and by the next generation the trauma will have been erased – maybe. The historical events of August 1947 led to the largest single displacement of people anywhere in the history of the world. This means that my family’s experience is far from unique and almost every day I meet others with similar stories to tell in Karachi, Delhi, Kolkata, Dhaka or London.

South Asia is where a quarter of the world’s population lives (30 percent of them are under 15 years old) with some of the fastest growing cities – perhaps megalopolis would be a better description. Based in Delhi, I often travel to Dhaka, Karachi, Mumbai – three of the world’s fastest growing cities with populations of 15 million plus (bigger than many European countries). In my hotel room I turn on BBC World News to see the latest developments. There are stories about the new Pope (let’s start at the top!), the War Crimes Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, and the mysterious death in the UK of another Russian who was opposed to Putin’s regime. In France they were protesting against gay marriage and last month I watched the latest chapter of the Eurocrisis unfolding in Cyprus. And then, out of the blue, comes the news of Margaret Thatcher’s death – the woman who divided Britain and will be remembered by history as the most Eurosceptic of all British Prime Ministers.

The business news on another TV channel is gloomy – even in the BRIC countries growth has slowed. China had been in double figures but now its economy is growing at a mere seven percent. Whizzy graphics swim across the screen, showing how car sales in India have plummeted by 26 percent after rising steadily for seven years. There is also consternation about the fact that India may lose its place at the top of the BRIC table to another ‘I’: Indonesia. Turning to *The New York Times* I discover that the Pakistani writer Mohsin Hamid, author of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (now also a film), has just published his new

novel: *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*. The Turkish writer Elmira Bayrashi put it even more bluntly, giving her new book the title *Steve Jobs Lives in Pakistan*.

So is there a new gold rush? Will millions of young Europeans flock to the East to find more than spirituality and inner peace? One academic I meet in Kolkata is confident that the brain drain will be reversed within 10 years. For the past five decades students from Asia have been going West to Europe through the old colonial ties; the North American universities have also been keen to lure the brightest of them by offering generous scholarships. However, in the not-too-distant future, as universities in Singapore, Beijing, Hong Kong and Delhi invest in their institutions to become centres of excellence, they will start attracting the best from the West.

On my travels across Asia I have asked people, young and old, about their impressions of Europe: trade, aid, education, tourism. These are the pillars on which the relationship between Europe and Asia is built. The Schengen Agreement has helped, but the barriers remain far too high for the majority of Asians who want to visit Europe. Around 500,000 international students from over 200 nations come to the UK to study; the business of English Language Teaching alone is worth over £2 billion to the UK's economy. The fact that visa problems are deterring South Asian students from considering the UK, with many preferring to go to Australia nowadays, is becoming a serious concern.

When we talk about culture, it is design and fashion brands rather than art that dominate the conversation. It seems that the Prada handbag is swinging in the gigantic malls and trendy bars that are springing up across Asia and the Louis Vuitton luggage keeps rolling along the concourse. Asia has become the world's factory, but it seems that the design studio is still in Amsterdam, Paris, Milan or London. The question is: for how much longer? Asian countries know that they

need to move up the value chain. The creative industries are being taken seriously by policymakers in Shanghai and Singapore. Design academies are springing up across South Asia to meet the rising demand. I am impressed by the young people I meet at the Sri Lanka Design Festival. They are proud of Garments Without Guilt (a fairer trade movement), and the twitter feed is all about up-cycling and sustainability. This is a hopeful sign. Europeans could play an important part in re-balancing the relationship between the North and the South. At the British Council we are exploring some of the key issues through 'Re-Imagine', a new initiative that is re-examining the relationship between India and the UK. The timing seems appropriate, as we are fast approaching the 70th anniversary of India regaining its independence. Gandhi was perhaps India's greatest gift to the world, inspiring millions through his philosophy of non-violence. Dr Martin Luther King, leader of the civil rights movement in the USA, was one of Gandhi's disciples. In Dr King's famous words, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny".

**Shreela Ghosh** is a former member of the Board of the ECF (2007–2011) and the British Council's Director of Arts in South Asia.



# Out of Context

**Basma el Husseiny**

At a time of fast and turbulent change in the Arab region, it is difficult to reflect on the image of Europe that prevails there. The pace and depth of the social and political upheaval in Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, Libya and Yemen, and its impact on other Arab countries, allows very little space for analysis and reflection while it is ongoing. It is, however, reasonable to assume that the image of Europe from the southern side of the Mediterranean and beyond will be affected by these changes. This article seeks to briefly examine this assumption in light of the history of the myriad relationships between these two regions of the world, which are so close and yet so distant.<sup>1</sup>

When the process of social and political change in the Arab region began in early 2011, with the infamous death of Bouazizi in Tunisia sparking the region-wide fire, many European politicians and analysts compared it to the ‘colour revolutions’ in Southern and Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early ’90s. The comparison is understandable: the colour revolutions represent Europe’s most recent experience with sweeping political change. On one level there are many similarities: the widespread street protests, the leaderless movements, the old regimes’ accusations that these revolutions were CIA conspiracies, and

---

<sup>1</sup> The terminology could be confusing and is often misused for political reasons. It is therefore safer to state that, for the purposes of this article, the term ‘Europe’ is used to describe the European Union as an entity and historical Western Europe, while the term ‘Arab’ is used to describe the mostly Arabic-speaking countries in North Africa, the Eastern Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf.

the adoption of peaceful protest methods.<sup>2</sup> On another level the differences are considerable: the Mubarak, Benali and Ali Abdullah Saleh regimes were strongly supported by the USA and Europe. These rulers, all of whom reigned for periods ranging from 24 to 40 years, were generally regarded by mainstream European institutions as secular allies who could be trusted to protect Europe's economic and political interests. Western media often portrayed Gaddafi as an eccentric dictator, yet Europe maintained very strong economic ties with Gaddafi's Libya. These European institutions left it to the UN agencies and international civil society organisations to deal with the documented and systemic human rights abuses that were committed by these rulers and their security apparatuses.

This of course was not the case with the fall of the Eastern Bloc regimes in Europe. The transition to democracy in the countries of South-East Europe (SEE) was carefully, patiently and generously nursed by the EU and Western Europe's national governments, as well as by the USA. Since 1992, the EU as well as many European governmental and non-governmental organisations and agencies have been engaged in wide-ranging programmes to build and support the emerging democracies in SEE countries and connect them with the rest of Europe. By comparison, Europe's response to what it termed the 'Arab Spring' has been rather hesitant so far, increasingly impatient and contingent upon following a prescribed model of 'democratic transition'. A glance at the EU's programmes intended to support the main Arab Spring countries, namely Egypt and Tunisia, seems to reveal a tension between the desire to follow the patterns of support used for SEE countries, as the Joint Communication issued by the European Commission on 25 May 2011 makes manifest,<sup>3</sup> and the facts on the ground in the Arab region that make these patterns inapplicable.

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.presseurope.eu/en/content/article/523241-revolution-came-serbia>

<sup>3</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/where/neighbourhood/documents/communication\\_conjointe\\_mai\\_2011\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/where/neighbourhood/documents/communication_conjointe_mai_2011_en.pdf)

Something that is not calculated into the equation is the degree of destruction caused by decades of bad governance. In Egypt, the most populous country in the region, the physical infrastructure is in a poor condition, but much more importantly the educational, cultural, political and judicial systems and practices are substantially deficient.<sup>4</sup> The reference to 'deep democracy' in the aforementioned communication could therefore be interpreted as setting goals that cannot be met by the Arab revolutions, at least not within the timeframe of EU support programmes.

Despite these apparent differences between the realities in the Arab region and those of SEE countries, which have been recognised by many European political analysts in the meantime, the perceived failure of Arab revolutions to deliver a prescribed democratic model is causing increasing impatience, almost disappointment, on the part of Europe. Such sentiments are perhaps articulated more clearly in European media than in official statements, but it is an impatience and a disappointment that we on the other side of the Mediterranean know and expect. The European conviction that Arabs are incapable of change is manifest in many major writings in Europe and was one of the elements of European thought examined by the late Edward Said; many of us actually saw Europe's support for regimes like those of Mubarak and Benali as a reflection of this conviction. The notion that Arabs are culturally incapable of change, let alone progress, cannot just come from the past two years and the dubious comparison with the process of political change in SEE countries. The same goes for the notion adopted by many Arabs that relying on European support is a risky business. So where does this mutual underestimation come from? Perhaps we should dig deeper? Because of the intensity of the current moment, one is tempted to attribute the complexities of this relationship to the specific historical context in which we live. But what if there are multiple coexistent historical contexts, some of them

---

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.presseurop.eu/en/content/article/498041-why-arab-revolution-isn-t-1989-again>

stretching into the past much further than we think, for decades if not centuries? Is it possible for several historical contexts to exist at the same time and in the same place?

The 20th century is the century that formed the world we live in now, at least politically. However, in the course of the second half of this century fast-moving Europe has managed to shrug off its first half. Very little remains in today's European psyche of the European preoccupations of the late 19th century through to the 1950s that caused two world wars: perhaps just the discourse about anti-Semitism and some faint memories of Nazi atrocities. The rest of what happened is in museums and archives. This short memory was essential for the idea of a unified Europe to emerge, but it is also a natural effect of the breathless technological progress that paved the way to the globalised world in which Europe occupies a first-class seat.

By contrast, the 'never-changing' Arab region is in a schizophrenic mode: partly struggling to be integrated into this globalised world with all its technological treats, even if it cannot always afford them or use them effectively, but mostly dwelling on issues that remained unresolved from the 20th century, even since the late 19th century. Why can't Arabs just 'move on'? What is the cause of this fixation on the history of colonisation? Is the inability to forget some kind of socio-cultural ailment? Why do Arabs attribute many of their current problems to things that happened a century ago? To attempt to answer these questions, let us briefly consider some of the most significant happenings of the late 19th century and the first half of the 20th century from an Arab perspective.

The colonisation of lands to the south of the Mediterranean by European countries dates back to 1830 (Algeria) and continued until 1962. By 1914, the year that World War I broke out, France, Britain, Italy and Spain controlled the whole of North Africa and many parts of the Arabic-speaking lands of the Eastern Mediterranean. Sir Henry

McMahon, the British High Commissioner in Egypt, promised the major Arab leader of that time, Sharif Hussein bin Ali, Emir of Mecca, that if the Arabs supported Europe against the Ottoman Empire, they would gain independence under the Emir's rule. This agreement, documented in the correspondence between Sharif Hussein and Sir McMahon, did not explicitly mention Palestine and excluded Lebanon, which was set aside as an area territory for a future French mandate. Against this backdrop the Arab revolt against the Ottoman Empire broke out in 1916,<sup>5</sup> which coincided with the birth of Arab Nationalism, a new ideology that was primarily conceptualised by Arab Christian thinkers from the Greater Syria region.<sup>6</sup> Today it is difficult to understand how Arab nationalism started as an anti-Ottoman and indirectly pro-European ideology. After all, the Arab Nationalist Movement continues to support the struggle (often plagued by hostilities) to convince Europe to recognise Palestinians as a people and ultimately to legitimise their quest for a nation state.

Around the same time that Sharif Hussein was busy negotiating the future of a perceived Arab state, and was securing his political future as its ruler, Britain and France were secretly negotiating the Sykes-Picot Agreement (also known as the Asia Minor Agreement), in anticipation of the imminent fall of the Ottoman Empire. This agreement, which was leaked by Bolshevik Russia in December 1917, and the Balfour Declaration in November of that same year

---

<sup>5</sup> It is somewhat ironic that the red, green and black flag of the 'Arab Revolution', which was subsequently adopted in all Arab independence flags, was designed by the British diplomat Sir Mark Sykes.

<sup>6</sup> The first calls for 'Arabdom' or 'Arab Nationalism' appeared in the writings of important thinkers such as Salim al-Yazeji, Constantine Zurayk, Maroun Abboud and Michel Aflaq. Many of these thinkers were Orthodox Christians who in 'Arabdom' found an alternative to the earlier call for an 'Islamic League' proposed by the radical Islamic thinker Jamal al-Din al-Afghani around the turn of the century, which they saw as alienating and submissive to Ottoman rule.

contradicted the letter and the spirit of his agreement with Sir McMahon, thus digging the grave of any potential relationship between Europe and the Arabs based on mutual trust and interests. The following four decades served only to deepen the distrust and hostility between Europe, consequently coined as colonial, and the Arab region. Liberation movements spread across the Arab region, resulting in negotiated independence agreements that allowed Europe to maintain some key economic and political interests, which ultimately led to the building of strong alliances with Arab leaders and regimes of the likes of Mubarak and Bin Ali.

How is this 'distant' history relevant today? To understand the relevance one has to make some further assumptions. The recent and ongoing Arab revolutions are essentially popular uprisings against oppression, injustice and corruption. Soon after toppling the heads of the regimes, these uprisings realised that removing rulers is a very small part of the solution. What needs to be removed is the value system that allowed these regimes to exist in the first place, but this is a colossal task. The dominant values in Arab societies are a mixture of patriotic sentiments, driven by the founding myths of the nation states and exploited by the departing regimes, and norms and traditions that privilege the old over the young and men over women, and at the same time limit individualism and personal freedoms. How can these values be changed? They can only be replaced by other values. The search for new values is still ongoing, but it had to start with questioning and even discrediting the intrinsic value of the falling regimes: nationalism, and with it the versions of socialism and liberalism imposed by the likes of Nasser, Sadat, Saddam and Benali. It is because of this process that the Islamic idea gained this immediate popularity. Here, the Islamists say, there is a complete value system that was not allowed to prevail because of the West and the old regimes imposing nationalism on the people. Furthermore, they insist, it is the Islamic value system that allowed the building of a culturally, politically and economically strong Islamic state and civilisation in the past. This is a simplification

of the current controversy in the region: the 'nationalism' ideology is not questioned or discredited by Islamists in its entirety, while Islamic values are not regarded as backward by nationalists, liberals and leftists. The public discourse on these issues is both a means and an end in itself. The fact that populations in the region are using this unique historical opportunity to debate the most deeply engrained convictions is a remarkable phenomenon. Nothing is sacred any more in the Arab region. Even anarchism, an ideology that negates the essence of social order and religious systems, is present in the arena of value assessment.

It is, however, almost impossible for the run-of-the-mill political analyst to guess the course and concrete outcomes of this process. Something that can be predicted in the short term are the results of democratic measures such as elections, whether parliamentary or presidential. These will probably reflect the value re-assessment process to some degree and at the same time fall victim to it. The quick rise to power of Islamists is a manifestation of this, and the even faster decline of their popularity since they started to rule is another proof of the potency of value re-assessment. There is no guarantee that this will eventually lead to the adoption of values that endorse and respect freedom, equality and tolerance of diversity, but there is no other process that is able to guarantee reaching this end. For Europe to find method in this madness is perhaps too much to ask, for Europe's experiences with searching for a new value system are a distant memory and did not always end happily. It would certainly be too much to ask Europe to give support and not have expectations as the stakes for Europe are very high: security, illegal migration, oil and so on. Asking Europe to do nothing at all is also inconceivable, because its economic and political support is sorely needed by our people at these difficult times. The delicate balance to be struck here is how Europe can support the process of change, which might eventually lead to our societies adopting value systems that can bring peace and prosperity and openness to our societies (and hence also benefit

Europe), without aborting this process of change, either for fear of the havoc it causes or for the sake of a short-term view of protecting Europe's long-existing interests in the region, or both. It is therefore important for European institutions to consider a more creative approach in providing support to this change process. The pattern of signing memoranda of understanding with Arab officials is no longer effective nor reliable, simply because the officials will not be in office for long.

I am naturally more concerned about the Europe I know and trust: civil society organisations, cultural operators, artists and writers. For this Europe I propose that it is useful to think less about particulars and more about contexts. Particular works of art and particular cultural activities and events have value and meaning within their boundaries, but putting them in a broader context helps to show the potential impact they had or would have, in their original localities as well as in Europe. To give a concrete example: it is impossible to adequately appreciate the impact of an exhibition or a play about the Lebanese civil war without some acknowledgement of the Asia Minor Agreement that carved Lebanon into the country we know today. Why? Because this is the context that most Arabs use to understand and appreciate much of their artistic production, especially those expressions that attempt to reflect on political realities. I am by no means saying that the historical context is the only relevant way of looking at artistic work produced today; I'm just saying that the historical context has been totally overlooked. This applies not only to appreciating artistic work, but also to understanding the ongoing upheavals in the Arab region. I believe that, in trying to understand the current situation, it is essential to consider how this region was shaped during the first half of the 20th century. Is this a tedious request? Maybe, but it might also be useful for European artists and cultural operators to re-visit Europe's colonial past and engage in a discussion with us about how the present moment relates to this past. After all, the colonial past is perhaps the most palpable shared heritage of Europe and the Arab region.

**Basma el Hussein** is an arts manager and cultural activist who has been involved in supporting independent cultural projects and organisations in the Arab region for the past 20 years.



# Between Pessimism and Hope

## Europe as seen from the Balkans

**Peter Vermeersch**

One afternoon last November, during a trip to Kosovo, I went to one of the bustling cafés in the centre of Pristina, ordered a macchiato at the bar and looked around for a seat among the crowd. In the corner I spotted an armchair that was still empty; in an identical chair alongside sat a grey-haired lady, smoking, drinking coffee, observing the crowd and smiling as if the whole bar was her own. I sat down and we started chatting, and it soon turned out that the bar *was* in fact her own. She introduced herself as Violeta. She had bought this place about 20 years ago, she told me, and now she looked on with pleasure at the hip Kosovar youth who was running the bar for her.

I complimented her on her business success and she laughed out loud as if I had just told her an incredibly funny joke. She wasn't a businesswoman at all, she said, she had just been lucky. Well, sort of lucky anyway. During the wartime period of the early 1990s – the violence had not yet come to Kosovo but was raging in Croatia and Bosnia – the Yugoslav dinar suffered from world-record hyperinflation. In 1993 the average daily rate of inflation must have been around 100 percent. That was a terrible thing, especially in Kosovo, which was already a poor region then, but there were unexpected upsides. For instance, if you were smart and lucky you could buy real estate for almost nothing.

“How did that work?” I asked.

She explained: “The rate of inflation was so high at the time that if you concluded a contract at the start of the month then by the end of the month the agreed price would be worth only a small portion of that original sum. If you could get hold of some hard currency from abroad, you could make fantastic deals. I know people in Pristina who bought a flat at the time for just a handful of deutschmarks. We were lucky, even though the times were not.”

Over the last few months, while travelling around the former Yugoslavia and talking with people about their feelings about the future of this region – people I accidentally met in buses, shops and cafés but also fellow social scientists – I’ve often thought back to Violeta’s story. It prompted me to muse about how to characterise and describe the current state of affairs in the former Yugoslavia. All the wars are now long over and in the midst of all the nationalist politics there is also a genuine longing for reconciliation and moving on, but people mostly still seem to rely on the old ways of hoping and forms of optimism: they count on a little bit of luck here or there, on something which should perhaps be called ‘collateral advantage’, something that might accidentally go right while most things are going wrong most of the time. They count on making a bit of extra money on the black market or they await a surprise remittance from a family member abroad, an unforeseen opportunity to travel across borders or some unexpected financial support from an international organisation. There’s a palpable longing for normality, especially in places that were seriously affected by the war, and I suppose this says something about people’s realisation that there has been no return to normality yet. There may be no imminent danger of war today, but the mere fact that many still regard the circumstances in which they live as exceptional shows that the current times have not offered them much *structural* hope. It’s difficult for hope and trust to take root, not only because there are issues from the past that linger on even in the more advanced countries of the region – issues such as persistent corruption, personal

trauma, overheated nationalism and economic uncertainty – but also because there seems to be no external source of structural hope for the future. There is of course the great aspiration of many people to become citizens of the European Union – for Croatia and Slovenia that’s already a reality and future accession is the official line of all the governments in the region – but that dream is becoming increasingly tainted by the current crisis in the European Union itself. Overall, it seems that the view of Europe from the Balkans hovers between pessimism and hope.

This could and should be the topic of a deeper inquiry: how do the Balkans see Europe? And more importantly, how do they see it now at these times of crisis? What are their narratives about Europe? How exactly should we understand the pessimism and where lies the hope? In the context of the enlargement of the European Union one often reads about how Europe sees the Balkans and former Yugoslavia in particular – the region is usually described as being in need of further transition, economic development, reconciliation and post-conflict justice – but the opposite question is rarely asked.

Here I can only provide an answer to that question by way of a quick sketch. The issue touches upon a highly complex field of stories, thoughts and social interactions, one that merits fine-grained empirical analysis. Moreover, I’m admittedly writing from a very contingent standpoint – had I travelled at any other time, had I not been the short-term foreign visitor that I am, then I could have met other people and brought other impressions back home. Yet I still want to make some modest tentative remarks about some recurring narratives about Europe that struck me during my recent trips to the region, because for me at least these narratives shed some initial light on a matter of importance for the European Union as well as for the countries that aspire to join the European Union.

One important narrative is that of regret. It portrays Europe as a missed opportunity. Europe was a chance that, alas, now lies unreachable in the past. In the early 1990s everything in Europe seemed simple: communism had collapsed and the European Union would expand in order to reunite the whole continent in an age-old dream of peaceful togetherness. The European Union was to become just another word for Europe, and European unification in Eastern Europe was consistently seen as 'a return to Europe'. This framing captured not only the political, economic, and cultural dimensions of the incorporation of the former Eastern Bloc into the fold of the European Union, but the moral necessity of it as well. But while the Eastern European states generally experienced this as a time of great hope and great moral inevitability, and lived in the anticipation of their upcoming accession to a zone of wealth, freedom and opportunities, the countries of the former Yugoslavia were preoccupied with internal struggles and war, and dreams of European Union membership were not on the agenda. After the European Union eventually expanded towards the East in 2004, and towards Bulgaria and Romania in 2007, many people in the former Yugoslavia seem to have been overcome by a sense of envy and injustice. How was it possible that Bulgaria and Romania, countries that Yugoslav citizens had customarily regarded as backward and poor in the 1970s and '80s, were now being allowed to join the European club? What had pushed the ex-Yugoslav countries of the former Yugoslavia, with the exception of Slovenia, so much further back in time? Many people, of course, realise all too well what happened, but even for them this particular twist of history still feels unfair. In other words, for many in the Balkans the term 'Europe' is still synonymous with a general feeling of having missed out, of having been punished for being tied to political leaders who were preoccupied with the wrong obsessions at the wrong moment. The story of full European unification – including not only Central Europe but also the entire Balkans – is for many the story of what psychologist Adam Phillips termed 'the un-lived life': it could have happened, we could have been ready for it, it was always a potential history; but it was

never realised. It's important to note that in this narrative the European institutions, and other international intervening (or non-intervening) agencies, do not remain without blame. The story of missing out on a historical moment is also the story of having been the victim of a lack of European peace-building efforts in the 1990s or the narrative of European interferences that only served to exacerbate the deadly forces which had been unleashed by those who broke up the country.

So if the recent past brings back memories of failure and envy, does thinking about the future of Europe engender more hope? There may be something of a hopeful narrative there, but it's a hope that's still affected by pessimism. Slovenia joined the EU in 2004, but today it is not the political and economic ray of light it once was – Slovenia currently faces a severe banking crisis and may be the next candidate for a European bailout – and Croatia is set to join the European Union in July 2013, but unemployment in that country is soaring and many sectors of the economy are not so sure they'll have an easier time after joining. In the ex-Yugoslav countries that find themselves in even more intractable economic and political trouble, a growing number of people are wondering whether the protracted European Union membership process will really be so beneficial for them. Against the background of current events in the eurozone, what sort of European Union is now finally arriving in ex-Yugoslavia? Across the region, the regret about having missed out on the period when Europe could truly be reunited is sometimes reinforced by the feeling that the European Union is no longer the same sort of club and that this development is not for the better. All the countries of the Western Balkans might still eventually join the European Union, and they may even reconcile some of their quarrels for the simple purpose of satisfying the preconditions for accession set by the European Union, but many people think that the European structures after which they are striving can't really help them with some of their important long-term concerns. What are these concerns? One, of course, is the question of

how to deal with the legacy of war and the creation of a situation of peace and stability in which lasting reconciliation would be possible. There are attempts by the European Union to stimulate such processes, but people are often reminded of the times in the past when foreign intervention did not help to create peace. Moreover, there's the strong tendency of political leaders in the region to remain attached to problems of the past. For example, the negotiations in Brussels between Serbia and Kosovo are ongoing and there's an objective interest in reaching an agreement for everyone involved, but political leaders in Belgrade are mired in their political legacies, as Balkans expert Eric Gordy recently argued: "Every party that is in a position to influence the debate has a record of supporting the Milošević regime's policy toward Kosovo before 2000 and of trying to pick up Milošević's voters by continuing his policies afterward."

And people are not only concerned about the EU's power to deal with such unfinished war business; there's also worry related to future economic wellbeing and prosperity. People are increasingly asking whether the EU is still equipped to bring prosperity to the Balkans. Across the region average wages are low, unemployment rates are high (in Montenegro, Serbia and Bosnia it's higher than 20 percent, in Macedonia and Kosovo it's over 30 percent, and locally it may rise to 50 percent and more), poverty is high as well (especially among socially excluded communities such as the Roma), and inequality seems to be on the rise. Change in social welfare is urgently needed, but there is growing doubt about the EU's capacity to effectuate it. European Union recipes seem to fail elsewhere – why should they work where the situation is bad to begin with? The pessimistic narrative, however varied it may be, can perhaps be summarised as something we strive for because there's no alternative if we are to bring peace and prosperity, but the accession process is politically limited: it's a project to promote open markets, reduced public spending and fiscal responsibility, and that won't necessarily bring us either the politics or the prosperity that we need.

Such pessimism sometimes leads to resistance, and interestingly, 'resistance' is a powerful trope in the region: the Balkans are sometimes seen as a place that resists European normality (in ways both annoying and colourful), and the image of being a rebel is also quite deeply entrenched in the region itself. Unfortunately, resistance can come in the form of resurgent nationalism. Active opposition to the European Union sometimes overlaps with an old nationalist rhetoric. This is visible in various areas, even in a field such as sexual politics, where nationalism, anti-EU sentiment and anti-LGBT viewpoints reinforce each other. It's evident in the way politicians in certain countries cling to the symbols that were at the heart of the violence of the 1990s, or hold on to a discourse of national independence and opposition against any form of foreign dependency out of national pride. In society one can see its expression in ethnic discrimination, even in aversion to cultural or moral values that are portrayed as foreign.

The response can also be more constructive. Intellectuals and students in various places in the ex-Yugoslav region have taken their criticism of the European Union's economic policies as a basis for the formation of a movement for democratic renewal, institutional reform and alternative economic governance. This movement also wants to mobilise against corrupting elites and predatory capitalism. The clearest mobilisations occurred in Croatia between 2009 and 2011, when protests for the preservation of an important piece of social urban architecture in downtown Zagreb – the local authorities had sold the buildings to commercial investors – developed into a broader left-wing protest movement. Massive anti-government protests that express anxiety about the harshness of casino capitalism and a longing for greater social equality have also emerged in Slovenia and Montenegro.

It's clear where the hopes of the European Union lie when it comes

to expanding into the Western Balkans: not only is it the logical continuation of an earlier discourse about the political and economic reunification of Europe after the end of the Cold War, but it also signals the still existing belief that the European Union can function as a peacemaker through economic and political integration. In this sense you could even argue that the Western Balkans are the true testing ground for European ambitions. Feelings of guilt may be part of this process, too: the European Union doesn't want to fail where it failed in the 1990s. But does the same still apply for the ex-Yugoslav countries? Are there still some sources of hope in this region regarding the opportunities of a unified, peaceful, more equal and prosperous Europe? The official stance of governments in the region is that there's no alternative to joining the European Union, but for many people there is also much suspicion about what joining might lead to, and considerable disillusionment can already be detected, which is not merely related to that thwarted ideal of European unification in the 1990s but also to the particular forms that the European project has taken since its first enlargements towards post-communist Europe.

Back in that bar in Pristina last November I asked Violeta whether she was hopeful or pessimistic for the region and for its European prospects in particular. She smiled and answered me with a story. She told me about a group called the Post-Pessimists, which used to hold its meetings right there in the bar. The Post-Pessimists were a multicultural youth organisation that managed to establish itself in Kosovo before the violence started in 1998. As tensions were growing, young people from various language groups – various sides of the conflict – knew that there was much value in coming together, spending time together and collaborating in the field of culture. They knew how awful the times were and they were not optimistic about the short-term outcomes. But despite the fact that they knew how bad things were, they refused to be paralysed by pessimism.

That's perhaps what can still be counted on in the Balkans, that

there remains a culture of hope, which leads people to try to achieve change, against the odds. If it's there, it's something which can also be of use elsewhere in Europe. The situation may be bleak – it's certainly bleak in some of the poorer countries in the former Yugoslavia, and it may also look bleak across Europe when you see it from that region – but unexpected things are always possible. In the same way the Post-Pessimists in Kosovo once managed to establish themselves in the most unlikely of circumstances, there's still a chance that a movement towards democratic reform and economic solidarity will gain momentum. If that's the case, there's still hope for a European zone that is principally based on something other than technocratic measures and the idea that the free market must reign supreme; that hope is primarily based on such goals as social equality, creative citizenship, participatory democracy and cultural cooperation. If that's the case, then instead of remaining a thwarted history the expanded Europe might one day become the lived life.

**Peter Vermeersch** is Professor of Political Science at the University of Leuven (KU Leuven), Belgium. He has published extensively on topics such as ethnic mobilisation, minority politics, and nationalism and democracy in Central Europe and in the Balkans. He also writes essays and poetry and is strongly engaged in the multilingual cultural scene of Brussels, the city where he lives.



# On the Edge of Europe

**Iryna Vidanova**

If the European experiment is indeed in decline, then there is little evidence of this in Ashmiany, a Belarusian town on the border with Lithuania. Every day, the central square of this sleepy place with a population of less than 15,000 is invaded by buses full of Belarusians coming to and from Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania and the EU capital closest to Minsk, the capital of Belarus. Once deeply interwoven into the Western narrative, Belarusians are now struggling to understand and renew their ties with Europe. If doubts about a common Europe are growing in the eurozone, the opposite is true in my country. Pro-European sentiment is on the rise in this post-Soviet place. The interesting thing about the Belarus case is that the desire to be closer to the EU is not only related to hopes for economic gain; Belarusians also associate a common Europe with the values of freedom, democracy, opportunity and an open society. At a time when Europe's values are obscured or even threatened by financial issues like debt and default, they are becoming more highly valued further east.

The history of Ashmiany and its bus stop illustrates Belarus' complicated relationship with Europe. A little more than two decades ago, both Belarus and Lithuania were part of the Soviet Union. But today the two countries couldn't be more different. Lithuania is a prosperous European democracy that has seen peaceful changes of government since regaining independence in 1991. It has recently held the presidency of the Community of Democracies and chairmanship

of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). To crown its successful transition, Lithuania will hold the EU Presidency during the second half of this year.

Lithuania's eastern neighbour has, however, taken a different path. Belarus is best known as 'Europe's last dictatorship', the country's stagnating economy is regularly in crisis, and Minsk currently heads up the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the successor entity to the old Soviet Union. With Alexander Lukashenka in power for 19 years, a state-run economy, the KGB and its Socialist Realist architecture, Belarus is often seen as a Soviet museum. It is also the post-Soviet republic most closely tied to Russia and a founding member of Vladimir Putin's rival project to the EU, the Eurasian Economic Union. Belarus is the worst performing of the Eastern Partnership states and the one whose European integration has progressed the least. Once the Soviet Union's western outpost and today Russia's western buffer with the EU and NATO, Belarus has yet to leave the East behind.

This contrast isn't lost on most Belarusians, especially not on those who stop in Ashmiany. Despite the Lukashenka regime's anti-Western propaganda, busloads of tourists, students, democratic activists and local traders are still drawn to the European dream, which lies just a few kilometres from this border town. Since 2004, Ashmiany has been the last bus stop before the EU for countless Belarusians heading west. But this role is actually nothing new for the town, whose name comes from the Lithuanian word for 'edge'. Founded in the 11th century, Ashmiany has been on the edge of Europe and Eurasia for a millennium. It is not hard to see both sides in the town's historical centre, where the buses stop. Baroque houses stand alongside Soviet administrative buildings, Roman Catholic and Russian Orthodox churches face each other, and a statue of Lenin watches over the town square.

While Belarus' authoritarian government has cast its lot in the East, the country's citizens are less certain. Roughly half of Belarus' citizens, especially young people who share no nostalgia for Soviet times, believe the country should join the European Union. And these numbers have grown over the last several years, despite the crisis in the EU. Approximately 400,000 Belarusians will visit Lithuania this year. But half the country also thinks that Belarus should more closely integrate with Russia. Like Ashmiany, the country is stuck between East and West. Belarusians have always been a borderland nation, on the crossroads of Europe and Eurasia, and part of its society is struggling for a Belarus that would cast off its autocratic tendencies and embrace European values. Europe still means a lot for many Belarusians.

Belarus is no stranger to Europe; it has experienced European influences since the Middle Ages. The lands of today's Belarus (and Ukraine) were part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which joined Europe after accepting Christianity in 1386. Later, the Grand Duchy became part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, an unusual state that had more in common with today's EU than the states of early modern Europe. The Commonwealth (1569-1795) was governed by an elected king and a parliament of nobles, both of whose powers were limited by law. The Commonwealth's political system was controlled by a diverse noble estate, which totalled 8 to 12 percent of the population, an unusually large political nation for those times. Unlike Russia to the east and most European states to the west, which were autocratic, the Commonwealth was a republic modelled on those of Athens and Venice. In 1791, the Commonwealth produced Europe's first Constitution.

As part of the Grand Duchy and Commonwealth, Belarus experienced the European Renaissance and Reformation. By the 16th century, Ashmiany and 60 other cities and towns on the territory of present-day Belarus had been granted self-governing rights under

Magdeburg Law. Like many Belarusian towns, Ashmiany was a place of ethnic and religious diversity. Protestant and Catholic Poles and Lithuanians lived side by side with Uniate and Orthodox Belarusians, Jews and Muslims. In the 16th century, for example, Ashmiany was one of the most important centres of Calvinism in the Commonwealth. From the end of the 16th to the mid 19th century, the Belarusian lands were part of a rule-of-law state, a system codified in the Lithuanian Statutes, one of Europe's most comprehensive legal codes at the time.

However, living on the edge of Europe also had its downside. Ashmiany often found itself in the path of armies heading east or west. The town and its residents have suffered the ravages of the Teutonic Knights, Napoleon's *Grande Armée*, Hitler's *Blitzkrieg* and Stalin's Red Army. Over the course of its history, Ashmiany was repeatedly occupied by those from the West and the East. The town's first act in Europe came to an end in 1795, when the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was invaded and partitioned by Russia, Prussia and Austria. The lands of today's Belarus became part of the Russian empire and were subjected to a harsh policy of Russification. The Russian Orthodox Church in Ashmiany's town square dates from this period.

Though their lands were occupied, Belarusians did not forget about their European heritage. Ashmiany was a centre of national uprisings in 1794, 1830 and 1863, in which the nations of the old Commonwealth attempted to throw off Russian absolutism. Following another struggle between West and East – the 1920 Polish-Bolshevik War – Ashmiany became part of Poland between the two World Wars. The rest of Belarus was not so lucky: those who found themselves in the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) suffered greatly from the imposition of Leninism and Stalinism. World War II marked the end of a multiethnic Ashmiany as its Jews were annihilated in the Holocaust; only their houses remain. Most of the town's non-Belarusian residents were forcibly repatriated to other countries. The war's outcome also

ended Ashmiany's second, and much shorter, sojourn in the West. The Yalta and Potsdam Accords extended the USSR's – and the BSSR's – borders westward. Ashmiany again became 'the edge'.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Belarus gained its independence in 1991 and had an opportunity to reunite with the European family. However, unlike its neighbours and former compatriots in the Commonwealth – Poland and Lithuania – which embraced democracy and joined the European Union, the post-Soviet government of Belarus took a different path, tying itself economically and politically to Russia and its autocratic Eastern values. An Iron Curtain was replaced by a Schengen Wall.

While Belarus didn't return to Europe at the governmental level – it is the only European country not in the Council of Europe – Europe did come to Belarus. It first entered the homes of ordinary Belarusian dwellings in the form of an electric plug. The old-fashioned Soviet sockets with narrow ports weren't suitable for the plugs of electric appliances made by Western companies, which became available on the Belarusian market. Western television sets, irons, electric kettles, microwaves and hairdryers required more substantial 'Euro-plugs'. Those Belarusians who could afford it began 'Euro-renovating' their whole apartments. Light colours replaced flowered wallpaper, wooden or laminated floors covered linoleum, Scandinavian designs replaced bulky furniture, and shower cabinets replaced narrow Soviet bathtubs. Soon the trend went mainstream. While seemingly materialistic, this 'Europeanisation' was the only one Belarusians could experience at the time, as few could travel and see the real Europe. 'Euro-remont' became their idea of what European homes looked like, based on images from the movies and glossy magazines.

Today, Europe is closer, despite the borders, visas and the self-isolation policy of the Belarusian government. Per capita, more Belarusians are issued with Schengen visas than any other nation.

Belarusians make up almost 20 percent of all foreigners visiting Lithuania and 87 percent of all Belarusian tourists head to Vilnius. The geographical proximity of Lithuania's capital has made it a daytrip or weekend mecca for thousands of Belarusians. About three hours from Minsk, a round trip costs only €20. Just a few minutes from the Ashmiany bus stop, Vilnius offers shopping with prices and product assortments better than those provided by Belarus' state-run economy. The city's atmospheric Old Town, with its Gothic, Baroque and Classicist architecture, offers a taste of Europe. Vilnius and Kaunas airports, and their budget airlines, offer easy access to the rest of Europe.

Those passing through Ashmiany are not just heading to European shops and tourist sites; Vilnius is also an important source of European ideas and values. The 2009 European Capital of Culture is the home of a sizeable Belarusian diaspora, including democrats forced to seek asylum there. A number of Belarusian, Lithuanian and international NGOs working to foster democracy inside Belarus are located in the city, such as the Belarusian Human Rights House in exile. These groups organise independent political, civil society and cultural events that cannot be held inside Belarus. Vilnius is also home to the European Humanities University (EHU), a Belarusian higher education institution forced into exile by Lukashenka. EHU offers thousands of Belarusian students a European education without the Soviet-style 'state ideology' and government control that is omnipresent in Belarusian schools. It is also the burial place of many important Belarusian political and cultural figures, including Kastus Kalinouski, a leader of the 1863 uprising against Russia, as well as some founders of the short-lived Belarusian National Republic, the first democratic Belarusian state, which existed from 1918 to 1919. Besides having European-style beer, Vilnius has a European atmosphere that allows a freedom of speech, expression and debate which is impossible inside Belarus.

Inside Belarus, the country's European history is an important

element in the struggle against the regime's authoritarianism and Russification. Belarusian democrats see themselves as Europeans and look to the country's European past, while the authorities propagate a version of history in which Belarusians and Russians share the same heritage. Since the 1980s, civil society activists have researched, preserved and cultivated Belarus' European past. For example, in summer 2012 one of only 60 surviving copies of the 1588 version of the Statute of Lithuania went on sale in Moscow. A Belarusian student read about it on the Internet and a campaign was launched to bring this precious document to Belarus. Through the joint efforts of a local history museum, media, business and citizens, the necessary amount was raised to acquire a copy of one of the country's earliest pieces of legislation, which linked Belarus to Europe back through the centuries.

Until recently, the efforts of Belarusian democrats within the country were marginalised. With limited or zero access to state cultural and educational institutions and operating in a difficult environment dominated by Russian culture, they struggled to reach ordinary citizens. A limited 'thaw' between Minsk and Brussels from 2008 to 2010 helped foster a greater interest in Belarus' place in Europe. But above all it is the Internet that has allowed activists to disseminate information about the country's European heritage. In the 1830s, the historical centre of the city of Brest, like Ashmiany also in western Belarus, was destroyed by the Russians to build a fortress that later became famous during Soviet times. To remind citizens about the country's European past, civic activists are currently creating a three-dimensional online model of Brest's Old Town. Belarusian activists are trying to reconstruct the country's European essence.

At the official level, Belarus remains bound to the East. Minsk is materially dependent on Moscow for energy, defence and economic support. But the main source of spiritual and cultural inspiration, at least for civil society, is Europe – crisis or no crisis. For the rest of the country the change in mentality still has some way to go. This week, a

court in Ashmiany, located on the same Soviet Street as the bus station, ruled that a book of independent press photos seized by the KGB at the border contained 'extremist materials'. Printed in Lithuania, 41 confiscated copies will be destroyed. One of my professors once said that Europe ends where the statues of Lenin start. As the buses return from Vilnius to Minsk through Ashmiany on the edge of Europe they follow the direction in which Lenin is pointing – to the East.

**Iryna Vidanava** is an independent journalist, new media activist and historian based in Minsk, Belarus.



Photo: <http://bymedia.net/>







EUROPEAN  
CULTURAL  
FOUNDATION

# The Dwarfing of Europe?

For centuries Europe was considered to be the centre of the world. This is changing and Europe is struggling to come to terms with an altered reality. So far discussions have centred on tangible aspects like interest rates and deficits, but now an equally important question is raised: What impact will this have on cultural identities? Does a European mirror offer the same reflection as a neighbouring one, and how does this affect the way that Europe sees itself?

It is high time to boost and broaden the debate on Europe by focusing on culture, and who better to turn to for an honest view of Europe from the outside than our neighbours? In this first volume of *The Dwarfing of Europe?* series, thinkers from the Balkans, Belarus, the Middle East and Asia reflect on the continent's identity, triumphs and foibles. Their insights can help us craft new narratives for Europe.